

NYCC, NYLPI, Local 78, and 32BJ Co-Host Expert Panel on PCBs

Scientific Expert Panel on PCBs:

On Tuesday, November 30th, concerned parents, school employees, community members, and elected officials crowded into a meeting hall at the Teamsters Local 237 building in Manhattan to take part in an interactive, town-hall styled expert panel on the health effects of PCBs.



New York Communities for Change and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest organized the panel with Laborers Local 78, and SEIU 32BJ. Angered by misleading recent statements by the Department of Education (DOE) stating that PCBs pose no immediate health threat, the crowd came to get answers about the true nature of the daily risks faced by children, teachers, and workers in schools across the city.

Background:

This summer a New York City Pilot Study of the highly toxic compounds Polychlorinated Biphenyls (PCBs) in schools found elevated levels of PCBs in the air at all three of the schools that were tested. The levels in two of the schools were significantly higher than Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) public health guidelines, alarming parents and staff. Across the City, 700 or more schools are potentially PCB-contaminated.

The New York City DOE has responded to public outcry with the true but misleading statement that PCBs in schools do not pose immediate risks. PCB exposure in the schools generally does not pose an immediate health threat, but it has nevertheless been scientifically proven that there are numerous serious health risks associated with even low level exposure to PCBs.



In recent days, the City has proposed to change the pilot study at one of the two remaining schools, to *only* address PCBs in light fixtures. While light fixtures are likely a major source of air contamination, they are certainly not the only one, and they have not even been proven to be the most significant. Due to the numerous uses of PCBs in construction materials, and the severe threat they pose to human health even at low levels, such a narrow approach to addressing this problem cannot be permitted.

The panel discussed these subjects and explained why the City and the EPA need to confront this emerging public health issue on an urgent basis with a citywide plan for comprehensive testing and remediation.

Summary of Expert Comments:

With the crowd updated on the recent developments, Dr. David O. Carpenter, Director of the Center for Health and the Environment at SUNY Albany Medical School, outlined some of the major health effects linked to PCB exposure in studies and scholarship including: ADHD, permanent cognitive abnormalities, asthma, childhood leukemia, diabetes, endocrine irregularities, heart disease, suppressed immune system, cancer, and respiratory infections.

Robert Herrick, Senior Lecturer from the Harvard School of Public Health, followed Dr. Carpenter. Professor Herrick explained the prevalence of PCBs, their wide usage from the 1930's until 1977 when Congress, in a rare move, banned their production. He also explained that surveys have shown that nearly two-thirds of the schools in the United States were built between 1930 and 1977 and that PCBs were often used in their construction. He explained that PCBs could enter the body through inhalation, absorption, and ingestion making it extremely likely that students, teachers, and workers had elevated levels of PCBs in their system.

Joel Shufro, Executive Director of the New York Committee for Occupational Safety and Health, discussed how the regulations around PCBs have changed and morphed depending on the cost analysis performed during a certain point in time. He urged the EPA to acknowledge the emerging science on the health effects of PCB exposure, and apply the precautionary principle to protect school employees, teachers and children who work and learn in these buildings.

Sean Brennan, Director of Mason Tenders Training Fund, followed by wondering why the DOE allowed students and teachers to work, study, and play in areas that required gas masks and safety suits for workers. Mr. Brennan stated that the DOE's distinction between immediate and long-term effects from PCBs was misleading because the exposure was, in each school, a serious long-term phenomenon and other pollutants like asbestos are equally well-known for their lack of immediate effects.



Additional Points Made by Panelist:

Miranda Massie, Director of Litigation and Training at New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, articulated the importance of community action:

“They will do nothing, to be blunt, that we don’t compel them to do...It is really the mobilization of all of you guys and all of your coworkers, friends, and neighbors that will make the difference and make this happen.”

Brenda Riley, a parent of three New York City children and member of New York Communities for Change, echoed the deep concern many parents and community members feel for children in PCB-contaminated NYC schools:

“There should be nothing that would impede the education of my child or become a health risk for my child.”

Dr. Carpenter on the seriousness of health risks posed by PCBs in the long term and the misleading nature of emphasizing immediacy alone:

There are a range of diseases Dr. Carpenter's Center has studied and associated with increased exposure to PCBs that "you don't expect to see in kids in school," but because PCBs are so persistent, they "stay in your body and increase your risk later on in life."

Sean Brennan drew a comparison between the serious long term health effects of the 9/11 site and the health risks associated with PCB exposure:

He asked the crowd, "Does anyone remember what happened a few days after 9/11? When they asked what the air was like?" An audience member responded, "They said it was fine." Mr. Brennan then continued, "Did we find out differently? Yes, people are dying in droves today. This shouldn't happen. This simply shouldn't happen. If you know something is dangerous, do something about it. We need to do something about it."

Professor Herrick emphasized the need for comprehensive citywide testing:

"The first step really needs to be a complete inventory of the building[s] to try to find all the sources."

Professor Herrick on the City's new focus on light ballasts:

"It's easy to latch on to the light ballasts, replace all of those, which they should have done fifteen years ago.... And you can still have PCBs from all the other sources."

Dr. Carpenter pointed out the need to remove PCBs from schools:

"What really needs to be done is that caulk needs to be gotten out of there so there are no PCBs in the air, so that people can continue to work."

Dr. Carpenter explained inhalation as a major exposure pathway:

A study of rats showed a "greater uptake of PCBs when they were breathing them in than when they were eating PCB contaminated food," a fact the DOE has denied. Dr. Carpenter also noted that the PCBs that are most likely to be inhaled are more neurotoxic than other PCBs.

AC Cumberbatch, SEIU Local 32BJ representative, asked the EPA and DOE to consider the human health impacts of PCBs:

"We have come into a society where it's about how much it costs instead of what it does to our well being... How much of a cost are you putting on a human? Especially our precious, precious, precious children who are tomorrow's leaders."